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THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

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[Title Page]

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EASTER ISLAND, POLYNESIA[1]

By HENRI LAVACHERY[2]
Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels

[With 4 plates]

Few places in the world have given rise to more fantastic specula- 114
tion than this volcanic island, 70 square miles in area, lying in the [131]
Pacific Ocean, lat. 27°10′ S., long. 109°20′ W. Actually the so-called "mysteries of Easter Island", or rather the explanations which have been offered, are not the work of trained men of science. It is natural that the huge statues, standing erect as they do in a naked landscape against a background of black and yellow, should have appealed to the poetic imagination. But those who wish to face with candor the problems presented by certain parts of the world may well be annoyed when the poets' lyrical love of mystery becomes the starting point of speculation. The best students of Easter Island have always told us that it was Polynesian and could only be explained by Polynesia.[3] The evidence that we have now obtained is merely an addition to what was already a formidable pile. Nevertheless we expect that before long others will come forward again with tales of a lost continent of Lemuria, submerged beneath the waters of the Pacific; and that Easter Island is one of its peaks, peopled with Lemurian idols!

For geologists are in complete agreement upon this point. If a 114
Pacific continent existed, it was long before the advent of man and 133

[1] Reprinted by permission, with some changes in the illustrations, from Antiquity, vol. 10, no. 37, March 1936.

[2] Dr. Henri Lavachery, the writer of this article, was the Belgian member of the Franco-Belgian Expedition which visited Easter Island and remained there from July 29, 1934, to Jan. 8, 1935. It was initiated by Prof. Paul Rivet, of the Ethnographical Museum, Paris, and was actually two expeditions—a French one consisting of M. Watelin (who died before reaching Easter Island) and Dr. A. Métraux (of Swiss nationality), and the Belgian expedition represented by Dr. Lavachery. A joint subsidy was made by the Belgian Government and the National Belgian Fund for Scientific Research. The expedition was transported to the island by a French naval vessel and taken off it by the Belgian training ship *Mercator*. The visit of the expedition and the formation of its collections were both greatly facilitated by the Government of Chile, to which Easter Island belongs, who gave the most generous instructions to their representative on the island. After the death of M. Watelin, M. Lavachery assumed responsibility for the archeological work, while M. Métraux had charge of the ethnographical and linguistic investigations. A report on the results of the expedition was published in the Bulletin des Musées Royaux, Bruxelles, May–June 1935, no. 3, pp. 50–63; July–August, 1935, no. 4, pp. 81–90.

[3] Routledge, Mrs. Scoresby, Mystery of Easter Island, 1919.

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in a part of the southern ocean far removed from that in which the gaunt cliffs of Easter Island confront the unceasing assault of the waves. It is surrounded by vast ocean depths which occur in the expanse of 2,500 miles of ocean separating the island from the American coast on the east and from the nearest land 1,750 miles to the west, namely the Gambier Islands. Easter Island is a volcanic island, and a lofty one, like the Marquesas and Hawaii, in contrast with atolls and coral islands which are low-lying. If one could denude such islands of their dense coverlet of mango-scrub, breadfruit trees, bamboo and cocoa palms, drain the springs, and cover them with a growth of yellow herbage—then such an islet as Hivaoa of the Marquesas will come to resemble Easter Island.

It is the bareness of Easter Island, the result of its colder climate and exposure to the four winds of heaven, which has given birth to these misconceptions. The idea of Polynesia does not fall in with a barren rocky landscape, monotonous pampa, or a pale sun incessantly obscured by rain-clouds.

These talkative Pascuans,[4] like naughy laughing children, whose language and appearance is Polynesian without a shadow of doubt, can no longer be denied those ancestors who carved the notorious statutes, engraved the puzzling symbols of *rongorongo* and set up round the island's coast all those innumerable monuments (actually 184).

At what date was Easter Island first settled? There are excellent reasons for believing that it was between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the Christian era. We have certain traditions relating to the peopling of Hawaii and New Zealand. The Polynesians established themselves there at the end of their migrations between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Considering the remoteness of Easter Island, it is reasonable to suppose that it was peopled about the same time. The approximate date of the colonization of this island is, however, based upon the list of the Pascuan kings. This list has been narrated to several observers; the most complete is that of Thompson[5] who obtained it from an informant who was a survivor of the pagan period. One may assume a length of 12 years for the reigns of each of the 57 kings in the list. Maurata, the last Pascuan who was certainly regarded as a king, died in 1864, as a result of the Peruvian slave raids. Calculation gives us exactly the beginning of the thirteenth century.

[4] We may well adopt the English equivalent to avoid the clumsy "Easter Islanders."—Translator.

[5] A paymaster of the American Navy, and the author of a short archeological account which, considering that it was based merely upon a visit of 8 days, is remarkably informative and full. (Rep. U. S. Nat. Mus., 1889, pp. 447–552, 1891.)

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But how can one account for the achievement of such a long journey? The Polynesians possessed vessels that could face the open sea; they were capable of taking sometimes more than 100 oarsmen and passengers. Further, they put to sea in squadrons. The canoes kept just as far apart as was possible without losing sight of each other. At night they came together. By thus distributing themselves over the surface of the sea they were able to discover even the smallest islands. Some canoes were lost, but there were enough to ensure that some should reach their objective. Navigation was by the stars, according to the direction of ocean currents and as the wind allowed. But in the Pacific there are regular winds in each season.

Whence came the Pascuans? Every indication points to the Gambier Islands. The similarity of the Mangarevian and Pascuan languages is a valuable clue. Then the Gambier Islands contain ancient monuments which call to mind the *ahus* more than do any of the other *maraes* of Polynesia. Father Honoré Laval, in an unpublished account[6] giving valuable information about the ancient culture of the Gambier Islands, speaks of statues resembling those of Easter Island. Finally, the Gambier Islands are those which are nearest to it on the west. The Polynesians probably found Easter Island devoid of monuments and uninhabited; but this statement lacks proof.

The present Pascuans would appear, then, to be the direct descendants of the architects and sculptors of the ancient monuments. Proof of this is to be found in a comparison of these monuments with those of other Polynesian islands. One must also cite the traditions current at the time of the first contact with white men, in which the names of sculptors and of their direct descendants were mentioned.

But there are also certain obvious facts of a common-sense kind. Many of the traditions relate to the construction of *ahus* at a very recent date. Now the statues were merely accessory to these burials—the images of ancestors set up there. If the monument is of recent date, that which adorns it will naturally be so too. Then again, the evidence of the first foreigners to arrive is in agreement; the *ahus* were in living use at the end of the eighteenth century and were seen by Gonzales and La Perouse. We collected traditions reporting that ceremonies were held there still during the nineteenth century.

There is no evidence of the existence of two cultures. Up to quite modern times, when the *ahus* were being made and used, the rites and ceremonies centering round Motunui and Orongo[7] and the great

[6] This will shortly be published, through the agency of my Swiss colleague Alfred Métraux, by the Bishop Museum, Honolulu.

[7] An islet and village situated to the west of Easter Island.

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174 964 god Maké Maké continued to take place. The last bird-man was drawn, according to Thompson, in 1880. It may be recalled that the house of the bird-man, the tomb reserved for him, was inside the *tapu* surrounding the quarry whence came the statues and where the oldest still stand. This is presumptive evidence in favor of a close connection between the cult of Orongo and that of ancestors. Perhaps sufficient importance has not been attached to the fact that Orongo contains breccia sculptures from Rano Raraku,[8] and that it is from Orongo that there came the most perfect example of the typical Easter Island statue, that at the British Museum.

174 532 Take on the other hand all those manifestations of the plastic skill of the Pascuans—the sculptures on stone and wood, the designs of the rock-carvings and tablets, of the rock paintings and tattoo marks. The technique varies with the raw material, but the uniformity of style is indisputable.

174 The abrupt end, as it seems, of the activities of Rano Raraku has been invoked both by the adherents of the theory of an age-old lost civilization and by those who favor the idea of a dual Pascuan culture. But the arrest of activity can be explained by simple, almost contemporary, causes. The exploitation of the volcano was controlled by the clan of the Tupahotus, and, as everywhere in Polynesia, by a group of specialists. It required only a war to partially destroy the specialists—and tradition tells of many wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century. An epidemic imported by the [164] whalers might equally be responsible; today each vessel that arrives brings some malady to the Pascuans. Finally, the Peruvian raids (1859–61) are traditionally reported to have given the coup-de-grace to the class of *maoris* (exports).

174 412 The fact that in 1886 the Pascuans had already forgotten how and why their activities had been brought to a close, as well as other facts about their culture—such as how the statues were transported, and the meaning of the tablets—is no evidence of the antiquity of these facts, nor does it justify an attribution to another culture. For we have seen these same Pascuans refusing to admit that the stone adzes could have been used to work wood; while it is certain that before 1860 iron must have been very rare in the island, and that their immediate forebears must necessarily have worked wood with the aforesaid adzes. On the other hand they freely admit that adzes and stone chisels were used to work the two kinds of andesite of which the statues, bols, and house stones were made. By a curious inversion the Pascuan regards wood as being harder and more difficult to work than

[8] A volcano in the eastern part of Easter Island. On its slopes is the quarry where the statues were hewn.

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stone, so easy to fashion is the stone of this island. This argument* can be used against those who put forward the alleged difficulty of carving igneous rock as a reason for attributing them to a race more skilled, more strong, and gifted with better implements than the Polynesians.

But to return to the first Polynesian colonists. Very probably the fauna and flora of Easter Island were extremely restricted. But following a custom common in all their migrations, they would have taken with them plants, seeds of the most useful vegetables, rats, and chickens. They colonized the island, and their first settlements were at Anakena on the north coast and at Akahanga on the south. They set about conserving rainwater, for Easter Island has no springs. At the same time they learned how to protect the crops against the continual winds. They were familiar with certain crafts which they hold in common with all Polynesians—the making of cloth from mulberry bark (tapa) and the working of wood and stone. The latter craft differs only from that found in the other Polynesian islands in respect of the size of the monuments. The abundance of easily carved stone was the sole predetermining cause of the Pascuans erecting on their island the largest statues found in the islands of Oceania.

The technical skill of the former inhabitants is seen also in the manufacture of implements and weapons of obsidian, and of fish-hooks of stone and bone. These last were made with human bone, for man was the only mammal available with bones large enough. The Pascuan writing on wood shows their skill and taste. There have been found a large number of rock paintings and engravings, the former magical, the latter merely trial pieces.

The Pascuan house, when it is above ground, shows many technical analogies with the Hawaiian house, which, like it, is roofed with tufts of grass set on a framework of boughs. Whenever possible, the Pascuans settled themselves in artificial caves or holes in the ground, which provided a less precarious shelter in war and against thieves. The fowl house was built on the same principles.

The Pascuans were tatooed, and on feast days they painted their bodies with appropriate emblems.

Ten family groups or clans divided up the island between them. The king belonged to the clan of Miru. His place of residence changed, and his role was indeterminate. Many taboos, notably in the matter of food, isolated him from Pascuan life. He did not engage in the wars which often broke out between the clans of the west and north and those of the east (Kotuu against Hotu Iti). He pro-

* Unfortunately, however, the mystery mongers are not as a rule open to reason. Mystery is their religion.—Translator.

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643 174 212 sided over the experts in *rongorongo*, the repository of ancient traditions, genealogies, etc. They used tablets (Kohau *rongorongo*) engraved with signs as an aid to memory. The signs of *rongorongo* were the object of organized teaching.

174 764 769 The Pascuans practiced a form of double inhumation. The body was exposed on the *ahu* until the flesh dried up or turned to dust. The bones were then placed in the burial chambers. Sometimes the skull was preserved separately. There was a general fear of the spirits 315 of the dead. Commemorative feasts were held in front of the tombs, where chickens were exchanged for a ritual purpose. The statues at the foot of Rano Raraku represent the dead. Several of them have tatoo marks which were still used during the historical period. Later, the images of the dead also were placed on the *ahus*.

174 776 The Pascuans had a large number of gods, the chief of whom was Makó Makó. The same name appeared in other Polynesian mythologies. It would seem to be connected with the source of that which supplied the material needs of the Pascuans—cultivation and fishing. 171 It was thus connected with the Marquesan Tiki, whose mask it resembled in almost every detail. Makó Makó is the creator of birds. One of the less obscure features of his cult is the indication, by means of birds, of a man [10] who probably represents the god, and who each spring gives place to another. Ritual feasts at which human flesh 266 was eaten were a part of this cult, as well as also initiation ceremonies at puberty.

175 179 The end of the old culture was hastened by the arrival of Europeans, who revealed a new world to the Pascuans, a world totally different from their own. From that time onward they lost without any effort both peace and the joy of life. Their restless spirit drove them to undertake the most savage warfare, which decimated them, ruined their culture and overthrew its monuments. Works of art were given up, traditions were lost, so that even the memory of their existence has perished. The whalers and slavers completed the task of destruction already well advanced. After being Christianized the Pascuans became ashamed of most of their past history, and essayed, not without success, to remove all traces of it from memory.

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[10] Tangata Manu—bird man. He was the first to get possession of the first egg laid by the bird *Manutara* (hirsut) in the island of Motunui (spring equinox).

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1. FACADE FACING SEA, AHU OF ANAKENA, EASTER ISLAND.
The huge blocks are worked only at the joints.

2. VOLCANO OF RANO RARAKU, EASTER ISLAND, SHOWING STATUES BELOW QUARRY.

[End plate 1]

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1. STATUES AT THE FOOT OF THE VOLCANO, RANO RARAKU, EASTER ISLAND.

2. STATUE SHOWING TATTOO MARK ON CHEEK, RANO RARAKU, EASTER ISLAND.

[End plate 2]

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STATUE OF PUHAKONONGA, EASTER ISLAND.
Gift of the Chilean Government to Belgium, brought home by the Belgian schoolship *Mercator* in 1935.

[End plate 3]

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1. FALLEN STATUE ON ITS WAY TO AN AHU. RANO RARAKU. EASTER ISLAND.

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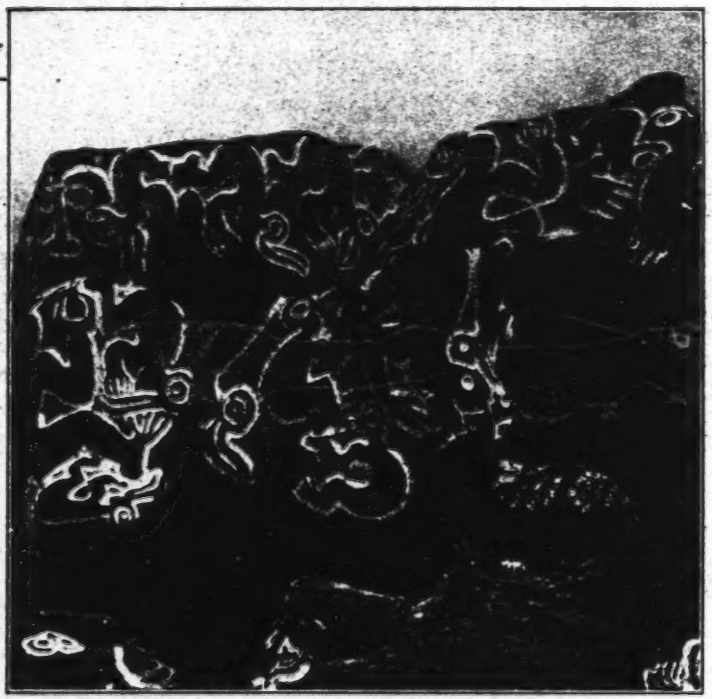

2. ROCK CARVINGS REPRESENTING THE BIRD-GOD. ORONGO. EASTER ISLAND.

[End plate 4]